

Warts and verrucae

Common viral skin growths and how to manage them safely



Illustrative example. Warts can look different.

What are they?

Warts are small, firm, rough growths caused by human papillomavirus (HPV). A verruca is a wart on the sole of the foot. Verrucae can hurt when you stand or walk on them.

Most clear without treatment

Warts and verrucae are usually harmless. They often disappear by themselves, although this may take months or years. Leaving one alone is often the best choice if it is not painful or troublesome.

Before you try treatment

Pharmacy wart treatments and home freeze sprays can damage healthy skin. Ask a pharmacist or clinician before treating, filing or cutting the area if any of these apply:

Check first if

- **You have diabetes, poor circulation or reduced feeling** in your hands or feet.
- **Your immune system is weakened** by an illness or medicine.
- **You are not sure it is a wart**, or it is bleeding, changing, unusually coloured or has hairs growing from it.
- **It is on the face, broken or inflamed skin**, or close to a nail or another sensitive area.
- **It is on the genitals**: contact a sexual health clinic rather than using an ordinary wart treatment.
- **You are pregnant or breastfeeding**: ask which products are suitable before use.

When should I get help?

- **Get medical advice today** if the surrounding skin becomes rapidly more painful, hot or swollen, there is pus, or you feel feverish or unwell. Contact CHG. If CHG is closed, use NHS 111 online or call 111.
- **Contact CHG** if you are worried about a skin growth, are unsure of the diagnosis, or it bleeds or changes in appearance.
- **Arrange a routine review** if a wart is very large, painful, keeps returning, is spreading despite treatment or interferes with daily life.
- **Contact us before self-treatment** if you have diabetes, poor circulation, reduced sensation or a weakened immune system.

Do I need to treat it?

Waiting is a reasonable option

Treatment is optional for most warts and verrucae. It can irritate or injure the skin and does not always work. If the area is comfortable and the diagnosis is clear, you can leave it alone and reduce the chance of spreading it.

If you decide to treat it

A pharmacist can help you choose a licensed wart treatment. Many contain salicylic acid, sometimes with lactic acid. Products differ in strength, age limits and instructions, so read and follow the leaflet supplied with your product.

Apply the treatment only to the wart or verruca. Daily treatment may be needed for up to 12 weeks. It may irritate the skin and it may not clear the wart.

Using a wart treatment safely

- 1 Follow the product leaflet.** Check where it can be used, how often to apply it and any age restrictions.
- 2 Protect normal skin.** Apply a small amount only to the wart. Keep it away from the eyes, mouth, cuts, grazes and surrounding healthy skin.
- 3 Gently file thick dead skin only if the product leaflet tells you to.** Soak and dry the area first. Use a separate emery board or pumice stone. Stop before the skin becomes sore or bleeds. Never use that tool on healthy skin or share it.
- 4 Pause if it becomes too sore.** Stop and ask a pharmacist or clinician if pain or irritation is severe or does not settle.

Do not cut, burn or aggressively scrape a wart

Do not use a knife, scissors or razor. Do not apply nail varnish or mix several treatments. These approaches can injure the skin, spread infection and make diagnosis harder.

What about other treatments?

- **Freezing treatments from a pharmacy:** over-the-counter sprays are available. Ask a pharmacist whether one is suitable for you and follow its leaflet. Freezing can be painful, may blister or damage healthy skin, and may not clear the wart.
- **Liquid nitrogen cryotherapy:** CHG does not offer this for warts or verrucae. In our area it is generally a private treatment, for example from a dermatologist or an HCPC-registered podiatrist. It can be painful, several sessions may be needed, and it is not clearly more effective than salicylic-acid treatment.
- **Duct tape:** evidence is uncertain. It should not be described as a proven or highly effective treatment.
- **Oral zinc:** some research suggests that zinc sulphate may help, particularly when zinc levels are low, but the studies are inconsistent and the high doses used often caused nausea or vomiting. It is not routine UK self-care for warts. Do not take high-dose or prolonged zinc for warts unless a clinician has recommended and is monitoring it.

How can I reduce the spread?

- **Wash your hands** after touching a wart or applying treatment.
- **Do not pick or scratch** the wart, and take care not to cut it while shaving.
- **Do not share** towels, flannels, socks, shoes, nail files or pumice stones.
- **For a verruca**, change socks daily, avoid walking barefoot in public areas and cover it with a waterproof plaster when swimming.

If treatment has not worked

A persistent wart is not usually dangerous, and it may still clear by itself. Do not continue until the skin is raw or damaged. Ask a pharmacist or contact CHG if you followed the full product course and the wart remains painful, troublesome, spreading or uncertain.

A clinician may reconsider the diagnosis or discuss other options. Treatments provided by a dermatologist or podiatrist can still fail and may cause pain or scarring, so referral is not routinely needed for a simple wart.

Verrucae and NHS podiatry in Gloucestershire

Gloucestershire Health and Care NHS Podiatry does not accept referrals for verrucae. If you need routine foot care that is not provided by the NHS service, you can consider an HCPC-registered private podiatrist. Contact CHG first if you have diabetes, poor circulation, reduced sensation, a weakened immune system or an uncertain diagnosis.

Contact CHG

- **Routine help:** cirencesterhealthgroup.co.uk/appointments/.
- **Reception:** 01285 653122 or 01285 653184.
- **When CHG is closed:** use NHS 111 online or call 111 for urgent medical advice.
- **Alternative formats or feedback:** contact reception if you need this information in another format or language, or want to report something unclear or inaccessible.

Further information

[NHS: Warts and verrucas](#)

[British Association of Dermatologists: Plantar warts](#)

